Khmu Community Portrait

by Miriam Gross

> You don't have to cut trees just because you have a sharp jungle-knife;
> You don't have to persuade others just because you have a clever tongue.
> Damrong Tayanin,
> "Social Values: Calmness and Restraint."[1]

Introduction

For a child born into a Khmu village, much of one's life and relationships in the human, natural, and spiritual realms was already preordained. The Khmu lived in isolated villages on mountainsides in Laos surrounded by jungles, tigers, poisonous snakes, wildfires, storms, and evil spirits. They eked out a precarious existence hunting, gathering, and using slash-and-burn agriculture. The lowlands, although seemingly safer, until fairly recently contained people determined to humiliate and enslave the Khmu. For this reason, learning life's essential survival skills; gaining the protection of the house and village spirits; following the extensive, calendrically based, taboo-driven prohibitions; maintaining family unity; and complying with societal roles were the only things that stood between the individual and obliteration. On the other hand, learning ancient wisdom and following taboos ensured the survival and even the success of the family and the village.

Ritualized Space

For most Khmu, their house, village, and its surroundings were integrated with the spirits of the land. For this reason a person's house and village became holy or ritualized spaces[2] intimately familiar and carefully organized to best meet the needs of both human and spirit inhabitants. Each house had its own set of protective ancestor spirits and the village as a whole had spirits of the land who would care for its members. Each family was under the protection of a totem such as a boar or an eagle who had originally helped an ancestor and would continue to protect the family if

appropriate measures were taken.[3] The typical house had three altars, two different hearths, and three different spaces for family meals depending on the occasion.[4] Houses generally had two rooms, one for unmarried girls and one larger living space where the parents slept.[5] For many Khmu, it was taboo to have anything associated with death or violence within the house because this would make the ancestor spirits who resided there unhappy.[6]

The village, which contained at least three different family totem groups, was equally well organized. In addition to family houses, it contained family workhouses, common houses/guest houses, smithies, and an additional common "house" that was a communal offering built to shelter the village spirits. Communal offerings were rebuilt by the entire village yearly to represent the renewal of the village.[7] The carefully designed interior space of the village was defined by a perimeter consisting of three to four gates.[8] Outside and surrounding the village were barns, more altars, and a ring of very large jungle giants that protected the village against storms and wild fires.[9] In addition, the cemetery had four different areas: one for those who died normally, one for those who died by accident, one for those who died as children or who were mute, and one for burying the clothes of those who died far from home.[10] Placement of the dead was very important to the Khmu because unlike their Laotian neighbors, they did not believe in rebirth.[11]

Outside the village's ring of large trees, there was an extensive set of fields that were used in a seven- to fifteen-year cycle.[12] Before a field was used, it was burned so that the growth of the fallow years could fertilize the new plantings of dry rice and other vegetables. Infrequent use of the fields ensured their long-term fertility. Villages moved infrequently and usually settled only a few kilometers from their previous location.[13] In addition to growing food in the fields, women went gathering, men went hunting using traps, and both went fishing. To succeed in these activities, people had to have extensive knowledge of hundreds of plants and animals, growth patterns, and likely habitats and behaviors. Every plant had a name and a use. Every stream had a name and a location. For example, one Khmu could remember the uses for each of seventeen different kinds of bamboo[14] and could map out the location and name for eighty-six different streams in relation to his village.[15] There were almost as many taboos for propitiating the spirits of the land as there were in the house and the village. For example, for many Khmu, it was taboo to cut down any trees by a stream because this would make the stream dirty and its spirits unhappy.[16] All Khmu were especially careful to act respectfully before the spirits in the many sacred areas both within the village and surrounding it. Thus the land surrounding the village was as well known for its beauties and its

dangers as were the members of one's family. This knowledge led to security both in terms of success for hunting and gathering and in terms of spiritual and natural protection. In the spaces between the house and the village, and between the village and the more distant terrain of fields and jungles, an individual formed rings of physical, natural, and spiritual forces providing the security needed for survival.

Ritualized Time

Just as the space in and around the Khmu village had been charted and ritualized, so was time mapped out. The Khmu used a lunar calendar subdivided by a ten- and twelve-day cycle that ran simultaneously creating sixty possible combinations of days.[17] Most days clearly defined which activities would be successful and lucky. Some days were good for starting, others for ending, and others for continuing activities. Some were death days, when it was appropriate to make traps or go hunting; others were good for planting or building.[18] It was taboo to do many different types of activities at one time.[19] An individual's birthday, which occurred every ten days, also determined what was appropriate for him or her.[20] Thus almost every day's activities were predetermined both in terms of time and location. The spirits would not become vindictive if a taboo was broken; they would simply stop protecting not only the individual wrongdoer, but also the wrongdoer's entire family. This meant that a family's protection was based equally on the efforts of all its individual members.[21] Such extensive taboos, although complex and confining, were also liberating since they ensured the individual's safety and gave the individual control over an unpredictable environment.

Ritualized relationships

The relationships between people in the Khmu village were almost as formalized as those with space and time. Age and gender-based roles were clearly defined.[22] At the age of about six or eight, boys would gradually move out of the family house to live in the closest common houses.[23] While members within a household all had to share the same protective totem, membership in a common house was determined by proximity.[24] This ensured that boys of different clans formed friendships at an early age. Most boys spent their days working with and helping their families, returning in the evening to sleep in the common house. By living in the common house, boys developed independence and learned skills and traditional stories from older men.[25] Since trap making, a major male occupation, was forbidden in the household,[26] most men stayed in the common

house during their spare time. Girls continued living at home learning skills from their mothers until marriage. Although both genders often worked on the same task, such as planting, each had a specific role to play. For example, men dug the holes and women planted the seeds.[27] At each age there were specific gender-appropriate activities and roles to be played.[28] Elder people and siblings were always responsible for younger ones.[29] The eldest son had a particularly dominant role within the family and was expected to lead, make decisions, and provide material support for his younger siblings. At the same time, the eldest son and his wife would be responsible for the care of his parents and would inherit the family household.[30] Although the house was often considered the woman's space, [31] the father of the family and later his eldest son made all family decisions.[32]

Village Leadership and System of Justice

Elders were the most important people in the village. They were often both feared and respected, [33] making all wider village decisions and solving conflicts that arose within and between families. [34] Although younger people and women could chip in ideas during councils, the elders alone made the final decision.[35] In larger group activities, elders also often directed activities. For example, an elderly woman often took the lead in terms of management of the fields.[36] Each village had up to four additional sources of leadership: the shaman, the medicine man, the priest, and the village headman.[37] Both men and women could be shamans, a position based on great knowledge since there were hundreds of different kinds of spirits, each of which required being dealt with by a different ceremony.[38] Truly powerful shamans could provide services for up to twenty different villages. Shaman's duties included learning magic for calling back sick people's lost souls, and for chasing away or calling out evil spirits.[39] The medicine man provided the herbal complement to the shaman's spiritual healing.[40] The priest, who had the only hereditary position, was thought to have a special relationship with the village spirits.[41] He planned and officiated over the various communal annual ceremonies that were held in appreciation of the village spirits' protective efforts.[42]

The village headman was usually chosen by the Laotian government. Despite this, he was almost always a very well respected individual who tried to protect the village against the Laotian authorities.[43] In addition to extremely heavy taxes, most of which went to line the pockets of petty officials and none of which were ever used to build roads, schools, or clinics for the Khmu, the Khmu were subject to corvée labor.[44] They were often called away to work for free for the benefit of the officials who controlled their village. Moreover, they were forced to carry messages among

the high-mountain peoples no matter how terrible weather conditions were on the mountainside.[45] Many headmen tried to systematically underreport the size of the village population so that the whole village could pay taxes for the few on the tax rolls. In this way, people were rarely forced to sell their fields and starve.[46]Since 1975 this situation has greatly improved. However, most of the Khmu refugees had left for America before they could experience this change.

Both because of their isolation and because of the treatment by the Laotian authorities, in the past the Khmu rarely went to officials with problems.[47] Instead, they developed their own independent, self-maintained system of justice. Although they lacked prisons, they had an extensive defined system of fines that were used as punishment.[48] Parents of the offender were always included in the discussion. The village headman and elders made all decisions regarding crimes and received a portion of the punishment money. They were also given personal apologies for misbehaviors perceived to harm the village spirits as well as the family—such as out-of-wedlock pregnancy.[49] For those Khmu to whom violence was taboo in the household, domestic violence was almost unknown.[50] However, when a man did beat his wife, she went back to her parents. In order to get her back the husband paid a fine to the village elders and headman, and performed an expensive "apology ceremony" for his wife and her family.[51] Often, merely the threat of elder involvement in a family argument was enough to resolve the conflict.[52]

Marital Customs and Village Organization

Customs surrounding marriage were among the most complicated in the Khmu village and formed the baseline organizational structure for all village relationships.[53] These customs also ensured that while power relationships within the family might be unequal, relationships between families in the village remained egalitarian even in the face of occasionally unequal wealth.[54] Most villages had three different clans represented among their population: a clan's totem was a plant, a bird, or a quadruped.[55] The wife of a young man born into a plant totem group (for example, the fern) could only come from the bird totem group, preferably one's mother's brother's daughter.[56] At the same time, one's sister could only marry somebody from the quadruped totem group.[57] There were two different sets of spirits who were particularly disturbed by inappropriate marriages. The ill-luck and sickness the spirits could perpetrate ensured compliance with marriage customs.[58] The father-in-law was one of the most respected figures in a man's life, and many duties and gifts were required of him in order to receive his future wife.[59] In fact one of the only reasons a man left his

village, aside from trips to obtain salt,[60] was to go to the lowlands and earn cash to pay the "bride price."[61] If a man did not have the money, he would often live with and work for his father-in-law for three to eight years before getting married.[62] His father-in-law could dissolve the potential marriage at any time during this period.[63] Although marrying additional wives brought high status, few men were wealthy enough to afford the additional bride price it required.[64] When a man had two or more wives, the first one, referred to as "older sister," took charge of the household.[65] After marriage, a man usually moved back into his father's house.[66] Occasionally, the family might have enough resources to build a separate house for him.[67]

On all major occasions, relationships among the triad of different clans were cemented and reaffirmed according to a ritualized series of gifts and duties.[68] An individual's main support system also came from this set of relationships. For example, these relationships would "give" an individual labor, food, or other goods. He in turn would pay them back with other "gifts." Thus these relationships formed an individual's insurance system; in a nonmonetarized economy they ensured that he could always draw on resources greater than those available to him in his own nuclear family.[69]

Living in Laotian Society

Not surprisingly, once the Khmu left the village and its surroundings they felt great concern over their future welfare. In addition, at least in the past, the Khmu were treated as uncivilized primitives by the dominant Laotian population, and had in many cases integrated this sense of inferiority into their identity.[70] Therefore, when Khmu entered the lowlands, many tried to hide and deny their identity,[71] and assimilate as quickly as possible into the mainstream population.[72] In this way, they simultaneously lost their inferior status and gained the protections the Buddhist religion had to offer. Further, it was almost impossible to maintain the village spiritual and structural organization without the presence of the land that held the spirits and the stable village environment that ensured the availability of permissible marriage partners.[73]

Immigration History

When the communist Pathet Lao started actively promoting change in Laos, the Khmu to a certain extent became divided. Although a few tried to remain neutral, or joined the Royal Lao government party and were organized in the "secret army." the vast majority joined the Pathet Lao

in its attempts to overthrow the government.[74] Three reasons prompted many Khmu to make this choice. First, a greatly admired leader of another Mon-Khmer ethic group, Mr. Kommadam, had aligned himself with the Pathet Lao. Second, the Pathet Lao controlled most of the Khmu territory. Third, and most important, the Pathet Lao was the first group to reach out to the Khmu and promise them equality and participation in the political process.

As the Pathet Lao started moving through the hills, it became increasingly dangerous to belong to the Royalist cause. Khmu affiliated with the Royalists started escaping to the UN-run camps located on the Thai border.[75] Approximately 3,000 Khmu,[76] mainly classified as "Laotians," joined the rest of the Southeast Asian refugees and came to the United States between 1975 and the early 1980s.[77] Most Khmu tried to settle close to other Khmu communities who were from similar locations in Laos.[78] This helped keep alive old bonds as well as facilitate communication since there are three different dialect groups in the Khmu language.[79] Occasionally entire villages reformed themselves in a single apartment complex.[80] Over half the Khmu settled in California.[81] The largest community in the United States is in the San Francisco Bay Area; the second largest is in Stockton[82] which has approximately 2,000 Khmu mainly from north central Laos.[83]

ENDNOTES

1. Damrong Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos: Kammu, Lua', Lahu, Hmong and Mien*, Judy Lewis, ed. Rancho Cordova, Calif.: Southeast Asia Community Resource Center, p. 34.

2. Kristina Lindell, Jan-Ojvind Swahn, and Damrong Tayanin, *Folk Tales from Kammu, Volume V: A Young Story Teller's Tales*. London: Curzon Press, 1995, p. 5.

3. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 27.

4. Damrong Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Live.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1994, pp. 36-37.

5. Ibid.

6. Lindell, Swahn, and Tayanin, *Folk Tales from Kammu, Volume V*, p. 5.

7. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, p. 22.

8. Ibid., p. 3.

9. Ibid., pp. 13-14.

10. Ibid.

11. Lindell, Swahn, and Tayanin, *Folk Tales from Kammu*, Volume V, p. 15.

12. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 20.

13. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, pp. 54-55, 69.

14. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 58.

15. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, pp. 48-51.

16. Wildflowers Institute, Khmu Social Service Provider Interview, 2/17/00.

17. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 18.

18. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, pp. 30-31, 58-64.

19. Ibid., p. 105.

20. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, p. 4.

21. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 46.

22. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, pp. 81-90.

23. Ibid., pp. 17-18.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Lindell, Swahn, and Tayanin, *Folk Tales from Kammu*, Volume V, p. 5.

27. Kristina Lindell, Jan-Ojvind Swahn, and Damrong Tayanin, *The Kammu Year: Its Lore and Music*, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series 33, London: Curzon Press, 1977, p. 68, as quoted in Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, p. 84.

28. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, pp. 81-90.

29. Wildflowers Institute, Stockton Facilitator Focus Group (Khmu), 11/11/99.

30. Ibid.

31. Tayanin, *Being Kammu, My Village, My Life*. p. 88.

32. Wildflowers Institute, Stockton Facilitator Focus Group (Khmu), 11/11/99.

33. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 48.

34. Frank Lebar, Gerald C. Hickey, and John K. Musgrave, "Khmu," *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia.*" New Haven, Conn.: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1964, p. 117.

35. Ibid.

36. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, p. 87.

37. Ibid., p. 19.

38. Ibid., pp. 18-20.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., p. 38.

42. Ibid., pp. 21-22.

43. Ibid., pp. 38-44.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 48.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., pp. 49-50.

50. Wildflowers Institute, Khmu Social Service Provider Interview, 2/17/00.

51. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos,* p. 49.

52. Wildflowers Institute, Stockton Facilitator Focus Group (Khmu), 11/11/99.

53. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 27.

54. Ibid., p. 31.

55. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, p. 16.

56. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 29.

57. Ibid., p. 28.

58. Ibid., p. 45.

59. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, p. 32.

60. Ibid., pp. 104-107.

61. Kristina Lindell, Jan-Ojvind Swahn, and Damrong Tayanin, *Folk Tales from Kammu, Volume IV: A Tellers Last Tales*. London: Curzon Press, 1998, p. 10.

62. Lebar, Hickey, and Musgrave, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia,* p. 113, and Erik Seidenfaden, "An Appreciation of Colonel Henri Roux's quelques minorities ethniques do Nord-Indochine," *Journal of the Siam Society*, XXXXIII, Part 2, 1956, p. 156, as quoted in *Minority Groups in Thailand*, Center for Research in Social Systems. Washington, D.C.: American University, Cultural Information Analysis Center, 1970, p. 462.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Wildflowers Institute, Khmu Family Focus Group, 11/13/99.

66. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, p. 89.

67. Lebar, Hickey, and Musgrave, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, p. 116.

68. Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin, *Folk Tales from Kammu*, Volume V, pp. 5-6; and Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, pp. 34-35.

69. Tayanin, *Being Kammu: My Village, My Life*, p. 31.

70. Kristina Lindell, Jan-Ojvind Swahn, and Damrong Tayanin, *Folk Tales from Kammu, Volume II: A Story Teller's Tales*. London: Curzon Press, pp. 10-11.

71. Ibid.

72. Patya Saihoo, "The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand," mimeographed by SEATO, 1063, p. 64, and Gordon Young, *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand*, Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1962, p. 60, as quoted in *Minority Groups in Thailand*, p. 463.

73. Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin, *Folk Tales from Kammu*, Volume V, pp. 5-6.

74. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 56.

75. Frank Proschan, "Khmu," *American Immigrant Cultures: Builders of a Nation*, Vol. 2, David Levinson and Melvin Ember, eds. New York: Simon and Schuster, Macmillan, 1997, p. 552.

76. Frank Proschan, *Khmu Verbal Art in America: The Poetics of Khmu Verse* Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, as quoted in Frank Proschan, "Field Work and Social Work: Folklore as Helping Profession" in *Public Folklore*, N. Spitzer and R. Baron, eds. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, p. 150.

77. Proschan, "Khmu," *American Immigrant Cultures: Builders of a Nation*, p. 551.

78. Ibid., p. 553.

79. Tayanin, *Minority Cultures of Laos*, p. 30.

80. Proschan, "Khmu," *American Immigrant Cultures: Builders of a Nation, p. 553.*

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.